



Michigan League FOR Human Services

## **Testimony on House Bills 4409 and 4410 House Families, Children and Seniors Committee**

**Karen Holcomb-Merrill  
March 15, 2011**

Good morning, Chairman Kurtz and members of the committee. I am Karen Holcomb-Merrill, Policy Director for the Michigan League for Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

The Michigan League for Human Services is deeply concerned about the impact of House Bills 4409 and 4410 on vulnerable children and families in our state. The proposed changes, including a 48-month lifetime limit with fewer exemptions and no extensions, and harsher sanctions, will result in families losing much-needed assistance during a time of ongoing high unemployment and economic uncertainty.

The proposed changes mean that the 48-month clock will no longer stop for a family living in a very high unemployment part of the state. Nor will it stop for a family that is working and complying with their Family Self Sufficiency Plan. The elimination of extensions means that a family that has been complying with their Family Self Sufficiency Plan and has not had a sanction in the past year but cannot find work because of labor market conditions or other barriers to work, will not be able to apply for an extension.

Stricter sanctions, including a permanent full family disqualification for a third sanction, rather than the 12 months under current law, will leave more families without the assistance needed to support their children.

Governor Snyder's proposed budget assumes that about 12,000 Michigan families will lose their Family Independence Program grants in the next fiscal year. A very high percentage of these families, estimated at about 90 percent, are working families. Generally they are employed in part-time and low-wage jobs. Most of these families, which include children, are just barely getting by. The loss of their FIP grant will cause poverty or deeper poverty and, in some cases, homelessness. Currently, there are over 20,000 homeless children in Michigan, almost 7,000 of them are under 5.

Of greatest concern in all of this are the children. Studies show that policies such as lifetime limits and strict sanctions lead to economic hardship and parental stress,

increasing the likelihood of child maltreatment. With child maltreatment comes the possibility that children will have to be removed from their parents and their homes.

Research emphasizes the importance of alleviating deep and persistent poverty in early childhood. According to economists Greg Duncan and Katherine Magnuson, not only do young children appear to be most vulnerable to the consequences of deep poverty, but mothers with very young children are also least able to support themselves through employment in the labor market. Women with children have some of the highest unemployment rates.

House Bill 4410 would change the current exemption for new mothers with infants up to three months old to only two months. Low-income mothers have a significantly higher risk of pre-term and low birth weight babies. These infants require significantly more care than normal weight and full-term babies. Because of the nature of the jobs that these women typically hold, they are not returning to work following a pregnancy, but rather are looking for work or starting new jobs, often without support systems in place. Requiring these mothers to leave their babies at two months puts these infants at risk unnecessarily.

With many families still struggling to get by, now is not the time to take away the assistance that may be what pays most of their rent payment, keeps food on the table for their children or helps with basic needs.